

Toward the Big Blur

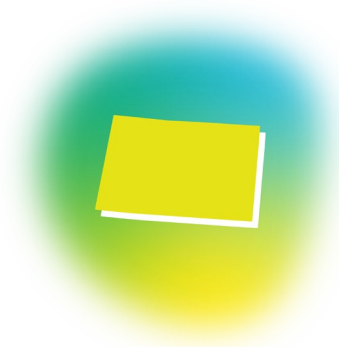
Momentum and Progress in Colorado

AT A GLANCE

In this first in a series of case studies featuring leading-edge states, Jobs for the Future (JFF) documents key policies that Colorado is putting into place to erase the arbitrary boundaries between high school, college, and the world of work and open the opportunity for all young adults to move along a path toward a postsecondary credential and preparation for a career.

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Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. jff.org

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Introduction

Colorado is a state primed for blurring the lines between secondary, postsecondary, and workforce policies and programs to serve Colorado's young people better. The state has a growing economy, political leadership committed to advancing innovative, affordable education pathways, and a commitment from state agencies and state-based advocates that every high school student in Colorado graduate with credentials of value to ensure they can pursue education and training opportunities that will lead to economic advancement.¹ The Colorado policy community has adopted the Big Blur as a promising strategy to make good on this commitment. It has taken steps to identify strong programming with a task force, meeting through 2023, dubbed "the Blur Task Force."



-  High School
-  Postsecondary Education
-  Labor Market

Documenting State Progress Toward the Big Blur

[The Big Blur](#) argues for the need to erase the arbitrary dividing line between high school, college, and career training to open the opportunity for all students, by no later than 11th grade, to start on a path toward a postsecondary credential and preparation for a career.² Two years of new, innovative postsecondary opportunities would be free to everyone, just like the previous 12 years of primary and secondary school. The idea is meant to remove the barriers many students face when applying to, getting into, and ultimately completing college, transforming the way we view the path from high school to postsecondary credentials to career. Rather than having separate institutions, the Blur is an integrated approach to serve students in grades 11-14 better and to support the country's economy.

Since JFF issued the Big Blur whitepaper in 2021, thought leaders, innovators, advocates, and policymakers across the country continue to show an interest in how to stop tinkering with a system that leaves so many behind. They have started to fully reimagine a system of education that blurs the line between secondary, postsecondary, and workforce. To date, we are inspired by the numerous efforts across states and regions to actively and intentionally “blur” the lines. We applaud and celebrate their work, yet we remain hopeful that several states will fully embrace a true Big Blur implementation with fidelity and start new—or transform existing—institutions to serve students in grades 11-14.

Each state we have examined has much work to do to fully transform its education and economic development systems so that all 16-to-20-year-olds are on a pathway toward postsecondary and career success.³ This vision does not necessarily start at grade 11 or end in grade 14, but rather it sets students up to pursue multiple pathways. Students in a fully blurred system earn postsecondary credentials with high labor market value by grade 14 and are prepared for multiple credentialing opportunities, ranging from certificates to associate's and bachelor's degrees and beyond that will enable entry into a high-demand, high-paying career path.

In this new case study series, JFF elevates a handful of leading-edge states making policy and systems changes to impact accountability, finances, labor market alignment, governance, and staffing. (See sidebar for a brief description of each of the key components of the Big Blur.) We explore how a state approaches transformational change, the progress it has made to date, and opportunities and future actions that lie ahead. Our hope is that these case studies will not only spotlight and accelerate impact in these leading states but also inspire action and drive innovation in other states.

Key Features of the Big Blur

To support learners' success more effectively in college and careers and eliminate their transition barriers, JFF envisions new systems and structures that include the following features:



Incentives for accountability and financing to promote new ways of organizing learning



Alignment of high schools, colleges, and labor markets so that 11th-grade students enter new institutional structures focused on postsecondary and career preparation



Governance model that unifies decision-making authority over grades 11-14 as well as over districts and postsecondary institutions that are working as a unified institution



Staffing structures are designed to equip specially trained educators and leaders to teach, curate and organize learning and work experiences and support systems for students in grades 11-14

JFF is developing a policy framework to outline steps states can take toward realizing each of these blurring components. The most recent version of the state policy framework is available on jff.org.⁴



Why is Colorado among the first states to directly implement recommendations from the Big Blur?

This case study examines the early indications that Colorado is moving toward blurring, including:

- Convening legislatively mandated secondary, postsecondary, and work-based learning integration task forces—one of which has even been dubbed the Big Blur Task Force. Short of having the formal governance structures to blur, these task forces of cross-sector players elevate Blur strategies as priorities for directing resources and encouraging local education leaders to use policies to adopt Big Blur practices.
- Seeding innovations explicitly tied to key facets and elements of the Big Blur.
- Trying to reengineer and streamline several existing postsecondary and career pathway programs and policies with Big Blur facets to make their aggregated effect more impactful, aligned, sustainable, and purposeful while pushing for needed system changes.

Colorado leadership, state agencies, and state-based advocates have committed that every high school student in Colorado graduate with credentials that hold labor market value and that put them on a path leading to economic advancement. Colorado continues to pursue expansion of programming to support this commitment to ensure programs offer a clear return on investment (ROI). For example, with Governor Jared Polis's support, the Colorado General Assembly passed a [workforce legislation package](#) during the 2023 session, which included a [universal scholarship program](#).⁵ The former invests more than \$38 million in zero-cost, short-term credential programs, including expansion of the state's [Care Forward](#) program.⁶

Further, the current [Secondary, Postsecondary and Work-based Learning Integration Task Force](#), also known as the Big Blur Task Force, examines how to streamline its nine separate and distinct credential attainment programs for high school students' equitable access and success. Currently, the state appropriates approximately \$100 million annually to these programs, and more than 40% of high school graduates at public schools will take some form of dual enrollment, an increase of 38% before the pandemic.⁷ More than half of all high school students will participate in some form of postsecondary career training or will earn college credits in high school.

Sustaining the Tailwinds

Colorado has seeded the landscape with promising programs and pilots, but the state must achieve permanency and consistency to scale across all systems, sizes, and geographies. Indeed, it is an economic imperative that Colorado grows its own talent and addresses its leaky talent pipeline. [It ranked as the No. 1 state for workforce in 2022](#), and it has the fourth-strongest economy of any state.⁸ Yet with unemployment rates almost a percentage point lower than the national average ([2.8% in March 2023](#) compared with 3.5% nationally), Colorado struggles to fill many jobs, with [two available jobs for every unemployed person](#).⁹

“ *Understanding the policy and practice landscape in Colorado can assist with finding ways to sustain the most promising innovations and inform systems change.* ”

In order to address these economic development issues and systemic silos across education and workforce sectors, Colorado made a historic \$85 million investment in the [Opportunity Now](#) grant program, providing incentives for innovation between education and employers to grow the state’s talent pool.¹⁰ With so many programs and policies in the works that have the potential to blur, it is important to understand what is holding Colorado back from scaling these programs. Understanding the policy and practice landscape in Colorado can assist with finding ways to sustain the most promising innovations and inform systems change.

The case study is broken into three sections: (1) the Colorado context, (2) state policy developments, and (3) the road ahead. We examine why Colorado is poised from both a leadership and economic standpoint to make bold strides toward creating the conditions necessary to achieve the vision laid out in the Blur.



The Colorado Context

An Underlying Driver: The Colorado Paradox

One of the main drivers of the work happening in Colorado to streamline systems and improve rates of postsecondary attainment is the Colorado Paradox. According to the state's [2022 Talent Pipeline Report](#), "Colorado—credited as one of the most highly educated states in the nation with a population ranking in the top five for highest attainment level in 2022—has one of the lowest percentages of high school students completing a college degree."¹¹ Many highly educated people move in from outside the state, which magnifies the stark difference between postsecondary attainment rates of native Coloradans and contributes to that paradox.

As Governor Polis highlighted in his 2023 state of the state address, Colorado currently has two available jobs for every unemployed person in the state.¹² While over 90% of in-demand jobs that provide a living wage require postsecondary education, Colorado resident undergraduate postsecondary enrollment has declined by 19% since 2010-2011.¹³ Simply put, Colorado is moving backward in its efforts to build a robust, diverse, and homegrown talent ecosystem.

For Colorado, the need to act to address this paradox becomes more urgent as the state's economy grows and demographics shift. The state comprises a mix of urban, suburban, and rural districts with rapid population expansion in its urban core, particularly along the Front Range, as well as within mountain communities with thriving tourism economies. Colorado's top workforce needs are health care, education, construction trades, information technology, fire, forestry, and law enforcement. In addition to these growing industries, Colorado's economy is also driven by its strong agriculture, real estate, craft beer, cannabis, and tourism industries.

There are currently [30,000 unfilled cybersecurity and coding jobs](#), and even before the global pandemic, Colorado's [health care workforce failed to meet the state's needs](#).¹⁴ The critical workforce shortages across all industries are driven by a leaky talent pipeline. According to a report from Colorado Succeeds, "...in 2020 only 50.5 percent of students who graduated from high school went on to enroll in any postsecondary education."¹⁵ Postsecondary results are alarming for students of color and those from low-income backgrounds—fewer than one in five Latinx people in the state will complete a postsecondary degree or credential.¹⁶ Colorado lacks strong data systems to determine which students go directly from high school to work.

[The Bell Policy Center](#) describes the impact of the Colorado paradox in stark terms:¹⁷

[Colorado ranks] 50th in the nation in the divide between the percentage of adult Hispanic Coloradans who have earned an associate or bachelor's degree and the much higher percentage of degree-holding non-Hispanic whites. We rank 47th in public investment for higher education. And demographic changes mean we have just 10 years to address critical talent issues as the state's over-65 population sees record growth, requiring more state spending on retirees, while the number of younger workers sustaining our tax base to fund education and other needs holds steady.

Both the [2022 Talent Pipeline Report](#) as well as the Colorado [Department of Higher Education's 2023 Strategic Plan](#) call for prioritizing pathways that incorporate employer input and lead to high-demand jobs for students at a low cost to the learner.¹⁸ The level of alignment across systems and leadership presents a unique moment for Colorado to make transformational shifts that better align education and workforce initiatives.



Governor Polis is entering his second term after a landslide election win in 2022. He has overseen and supported multiple initiatives that streamline and reduce barriers for connections between high school, postsecondary education, and workforce, including the formation of [The Office of Education and Training Innovation](#).¹⁹

The office is a collaboration between the governor's office, the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, the Colorado Department of Higher Education, the Colorado Department of Education, the Colorado Workforce Development Council, and key state business partners.

The new office is charged with supporting the "[expansion of work-based learning](#) through apprenticeship and modernization of our education and training systems for all Coloradans to earn a living wage."²⁰ Colorado has set a credential attainment rate goal of 66% by 2025.²¹ However, according to the state's [2022 Talent Pipeline Report](#) based on statistics from the [Lumina Foundation's Stronger Nation Report](#):²²

Despite having the second-highest statewide attainment rate in the nation, Colorado has much work ahead to close equity gaps and disparities in educational outcomes and access among white Coloradans and Coloradans of color. While white Coloradans have an attainment level of 59.1 percent (6.9 percent short of the state's 66 percent goal), only 25.1 percent of Hispanic or Latinx Coloradans (the state's fastest growing population segment), 30.9 percent of Native American and Alaska Native Coloradans, and 37.9 percent of African American or Black Coloradans have earned a credential.

To bolster talent pipelines and attainment rates, Colorado has made significant investments in programming that gives high school students options to earn both college credit and valuable postsecondary credentials while in high school. During the 2020-21 school year, 51,383 of the state's 278,424 high school students participated in concurrent enrollment programs.²³ According to a 2020 report from the University of Denver's Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab:²⁴

Concurrent Enrollment... [is] highly effective in increasing college graduation for high school students in Colorado... Compared to students who did not take college courses while in high school, students who took Concurrent Enrollment courses were more likely to: attend college within one year following high school graduation; earn a college degree on time or early; and have higher workforce earnings after five years.

However, there are disparities in participation. According to reports from the Colorado Department of Education and Department of Higher Education, while the percentage of total Latino students in the state increased over the last six years, the percentage of Latino students participating in concurrent enrollment decreased by 1.7%.²⁵

Business, advocacy, and technical assistance organizations have a strong presence, among them [Colorado Succeeds](#), [The Attainment Network](#), [The Colorado Trustee Network](#), the [Colorado Education Initiative](#), [CareerWise Colorado](#), and [Colorado Equitable Economic Mobility Initiative](#).²⁶

These organizations are advocating for and supporting systems change that better aligns with the state's current and future workforce needs. Many of these organizations also partner with each other and state agencies and institutions to ensure all students have the opportunity to graduate high school with both a diploma and a workforce credential of value.

The state is also fiercely protective of its culture of "local control," meaning cities and districts often make decisions about the implementation of state policies. For example, districts can choose from a menu of state high school graduation requirements, including concurrent enrollment completion, Advanced Placement (AP) scores, and industry credentials. They often use traditional high school graduation requirements as the default. Furthermore, the state does not collect data on each district's graduation requirements, leaving it unable to make connections about which programs and opportunities serve various student cohorts.

Local and multi-site examples illustrate alignment between systems, showing at least some of the enabling policy conditions, including funding for a "13th year," already exist in the state (see "Innovative Models" on next page).

Innovative Models

At **Arapahoe Community College's Sturm Collaboration Campus**, students can earn associate's and bachelor's degrees through a partnership with Colorado State University. One of the hallmarks of this program is that through cross-sector collaboration, the campus co-locates the full spectrum of the talent development ecosystem—including K-12, community college, bachelor's degree programs, wraparound supports, small business development centers, and local industry—in one physical location. The program also takes advantage of a concurrent enrollment partnership with Douglas County School District. High school students can begin a program of study in business, health, math and sciences, or technology. They can engage in a variety of pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs offered by the Sturm campus. Classes are stacked in two-day schedules to provide flexibility and opportunities for internships and apprenticeships.

Three rural school districts have formed the **Fremont Multidistrict Initiative (FMI)** in partnership with Pueblo Community College's Fremont Campus to create a regional approach to accelerate student success in high school and beyond. Formed in 2020, the FMI partners opened their college and career opportunities across the regions to enable credit-bearing learning in concurrent enrollment and other work-based learning programs. Cañon City Schools RE-1, Fremont School District RE-2, and Cotopaxi School District RE-3 take advantage of shared programs and resources for students, including concurrent enrollment, internships, and Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools (P-TECHs). This multi-district partnership is the first of its kind in Colorado. By combining resources and cross-district enrollment, the program expands options for students to gain workforce experience and earn college credits while still in high school. They plan to continue adding more medical, agricultural, and environmental pathways in the upcoming years. FMI also serves as a precursor to postsecondary funding such as Accelerating Students through Concurrent Enrollment ([ASCENT](#)), [Path4Ward](#), and [Teacher Recruitment Education & Preparation \(TREP\)](#).²⁷ It harnesses partnerships with organizations such as [Empower Schools](#), [Lyra Colorado](#), and Colorado Succeeds to transform its students' learning opportunities and experiences.²⁸

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(Innovative Models continued)

The **Innovation Center in the St. Vrain Valley School District** opened in 2011. Through the Innovation Center, students apply the durable skills they acquire to real-world problems and challenges. Students work on coursework and projects, such as web and app development and robotics, for both industry partners and the school district. Innovation Center students also have the opportunity to earn credentials that open doors to gainful employment at an early age. In addition to the opportunities available through the Innovation Center and partnerships with local businesses, St. Vrain also has four [P-TECH](#) programs inside district high schools.²⁹ Its P-TECHs include partnerships with 17 industry leaders in the region, including companies such as IBM, Seagate Technologies, and Tolmar and partnerships with Aims Community College and Front Range Community College that allow students in grades 9-14 to earn an associate's of applied science degree at no cost.

Organizations such as Colorado Succeeds and the Colorado Education Initiative have relied on resources from both public and private funds to address the Colorado Paradox. The [Homegrown Talent Initiative](#) (HTI) is a statewide collaboration that supports rural, regional K-12 schools and business partners with increasing student engagement in high-quality work-based learning experiences.³⁰ In 2019, HTI launched with [eight communities](#) in rural Colorado through private philanthropy.³¹ The HTI network now includes almost 50 school districts across the state. It has added nonprofit partners Empower Schools and Lyra Colorado to support school staff members in expanding the network. Many of the HTI district participants also accessed the [Colorado Department of Education's Rural Coaction grants](#), which “expand student pathway opportunities and career-connected learning.”³²





State Policy Developments

Setting the Table for Blurring

In 2021, the state legislature passed [HB 1330](#), which is known as the “Higher Education Student Success Legislation.”³³ The legislation, which was precipitated by the global pandemic and the influx of American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) funds, directs over \$50 million in federal stimulus funds to:

- Increase postsecondary credential attainment through financial assistance and wraparound services to support students
- Allow more institutions to award associate’s degrees in cases where students have earned 70 credits
- Set up an interim task force to review the role and mission of higher education, led by the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE)

In addition to representation from postsecondary education institutions and stakeholders, the task force included representation from K-12 and workforce to reimagine “the role of postsecondary institutions in a post-pandemic world to build economic resiliency and [strengthen the state’s workforce](#).”³⁴ The task force released a [report](#) in 2021 with six key recommendations:³⁵

1. **Innovation and scaling partnership grants**: Multiple stakeholders, including regional leaders, lawmakers, and the Governor, should leverage American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, additional anticipated federal funds, and matching local, private, and philanthropic dollars to create a competitive statewide and regional grant program to spark innovation and scale proven and promising, sustainable, approaches to postsecondary, workforce and community partnerships.
2. **Enhance transparency of postsecondary and workforce data**: Policymakers should invest in a statewide student success data interface, with the initial focus providing higher education leaders and policy makers with easy access to actionable metrics of student success.
3. **Develop new statewide success measures**: The Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) should develop policy that requires the development of new success measures, in collaboration with institutions of higher education and other key stakeholders, which directly align with the primary reason more than 90% of students pursue postsecondary education — to earn access to enhanced professional opportunities.
4. **Develop stackable credential/work-based learning pathways**: Lawmakers should work with education and business leaders to develop legislation that creates credential pathways in high-need, high-value fields at large scale.
5. **Eliminate equity gaps**: Lawmakers should require postsecondary institutions to submit a multi-year plan, with a detailed budget, to eliminate racial, regional, and socio-economic equity gaps in credential attainment and other measures of student success.
6. **Create a strategic talent finance plan**: CCHE should task state leaders from institutions of higher education and industry to identify options for additional, sustainable funding for postsecondary education, with the goal of making Colorado’s postsecondary learning ecosystem the best in the nation by 2030.

From Cross-Sector Coordination to Collaboration

The HB 1330 task force recommendations prompted the state legislature to invest in programs that support innovations to streamline the talent pipeline and offer job matching and placements for Coloradans. During the 2022 legislative session, HB 1350 created the [Opportunity Now Colorado Grant Program](#), which allocates \$85 million in federal ARPA funds via a competitive grant program to help create and expand innovative talent development initiatives across the state.³⁶ It encourages greater alignment across education and workforce systems in developing pathways into hard-to-fill critical positions in the labor market.

Chambers of commerce, K-12 school districts, businesses, training providers, and institutions of higher education can apply for funding. Each application must include at least one industry partner and one educational entity, signaling alignment and coordination are required across systems to scale and grow promising learning and training opportunities. The grants fall into three different types—[planning, seed, and scale](#)—with amounts ranging from up to \$50,000 (planning) to more than \$12 million (scale).³⁷ It will be instructive to follow both the plans and the progress of grantees to see how quickly and effectively they can set up cross-sector partnerships sustainable beyond the lifecycle of the grant (all grant funds must be spent by December 2026).

Utilizing Data to Inform Decisions

Another piece of policy spurred by the HB 1330 task force was [HB 1349](#), which the state legislature passed in 2022 to improve the alignment of data systems across sectors. This legislation charges the CCHE with developing new measures for student success in postsecondary and the labor market.³⁸ In addition, the 1349 legislation appropriates \$3 million from the workers, employers, and workforce centers fund for the Department of Higher Education to create and maintain a statewide student success data system, including institution-specific interfaces and a public interface. CCHE is committed to defining new measures of success to guide the rollout of a statewide student success data system. In December 2022, [CCHE released an interim report](#) that outlined the current

landscape of available longitudinal data in the state.³⁹

Current data are gathered for K-12, postsecondary, and workforce, including wage data by major for students who graduate from in-state institutions. These data cover one, five, and 10 years after graduation.

While these are good first steps toward aligning accountability systems, it remains to be seen how this data will be utilized to make decisions about future policies and allocation of dollars to sustain programs proving to be most effective.



Redefining the What and When of Attainment: Incentives Supporting High School Student Momentum in Postsecondary

Colorado has made significant investments in programming that gives high school students options to earn both college credit and valuable postsecondary credentials while in high school.

Colorado is one of a handful of states that funds a “13th” year of high school, enabling students to earn concurrent enrollment credits toward an associate’s degree. The [ASCENT](#) program allows high school students who have completed at least nine credit hours of postsecondary coursework by grade 12 to continue concurrent enrollment and earn college credit at no cost to their families.⁴⁰ According to a [concurrent enrollment report](#) issued in 2021 by the Colorado Departments of Education and Higher Education, “Nearly 40% of students who participated in ASCENT in 2019-2020 were Hispanic or Latinx.”⁴¹



In 2022, Colorado passed [HB 1390](#), which expanded the funding for ASCENT for all qualified students.⁴² It both eliminated the limit on the number of students who could participate in the program and reduced the number of postsecondary credits a student needs to have completed to participate. A separate bill, [HB 1329](#), which is the state’s budget package (long bill), included additional funding for the ASCENT program, which essentially lifted the cap on the number of students who could participate in the ASCENT program.⁴³

The [Career Development Incentive Program](#) (CDIP), which has been around since 2016, offers financial incentives for school districts that enroll and support students through completion of industry credentials, internships, residencies, pre-apprenticeships, and apprenticeships related to jobs in high-demand industries. Through CDIP, the state reimburses school districts for their program-related expenses.⁴⁴

During the 2023 legislative session, state lawmakers passed [SB23-065](#), which reauthorizes the program for 10 years and moves the annual appropriation from \$1 million to \$5 million with a one-time investment of \$5 million that is designed to encourage districts to change their graduation guidelines to include credentials, work-based learning, or concurrent enrollment.

In 2021, the [Path4Ward](#) pilot program was established by SB21-106.⁴⁵ Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who graduate early will get funding for postsecondary education or career training programs during their fourth year of high school. These programs include enrollment in college, internships, or apprenticeships to incentivize students to graduate high school early. Students will receive funds dependent on which semester they graduate.

For example, if they graduate before their fourth year begins, the student will receive 75% of the average state share of per-pupil revenue or \$3,500 (whichever amount is greater). If they graduate before the second semester of their fourth year, they will receive \$2,000 or 45% of the average state share of per-pupil revenue (whichever is greater). They can use the money to pay college or class tuition fees, and any unspent funds can be used for other qualifying expenditures relating to school/apprenticeship fees and transportation. The pilot program is set to last five years, with five participating schools or groups of schools from a mix of urban, suburban, and rural districts. Each school is granted 25% of the average state share of per-pupil revenue for each student enrolled in the program.

These key investments indicate the state's financial commitment to increasing the number of students earning degrees and credentials. However, the state offers students nine separate programs, and the systems for accessing these opportunities are not always easy to navigate.

These programs are:

1. Concurrent enrollment
2. ASCENT
3. Early colleges
4. P-TECHs
5. TREP
6. Innovation Learning Opportunities Pilot
7. CDIP
8. Career and technical education
9. Path4Ward

Realizing the Vision for a More Effective and Equitable “Blurred” System

One of Colorado’s main initiatives is to scale the most effective programs that streamline secondary, postsecondary, and work-based and workplace learning opportunities for students.

The HB 1330 task force raised the need to improve efficiencies, prompting the General Assembly to pass HB 1215, establishing the Secondary, Postsecondary and Work-Based Learning Integration Task Force, also referred to as the Big Blur Task Force. Similar to 1330, the 1215 task force comprises members from secondary and postsecondary education, workforce, advocacy, and business. They met over the course of 2022 to examine the nine programs in Colorado that offer high school students the opportunity to earn college credit and credentials, including CDIP, concurrent enrollment, and P-TECHs.



The task force released an interim report in December 2022 with initial recommendations about how to deliver programming more efficiently and equitably by streamlining current programming and better centering the needs of learners. The final report is expected to provide actionable recommendations for codifying policy and implementation practices that will ensure the most effective programs are both scalable and sustainable in the long term.

It will be critical to watch how Colorado’s agencies, intermediaries, and businesses work to further center the learner’s experience in ways that make these opportunities easy to understand and much more accessible. Like the other recent investments made in the state, it will also be important to understand what a sustained funding plan looks like and how data will be used to determine which programs are most effective and why.



The Road Ahead

Colorado has made early moves to blur the lines between secondary, postsecondary, and workforce. However, much work remains to be done to scale these programs regionally and statewide. While the current cross-sector task forces and political climate show promise, low rates of postsecondary attainment persist and will require swift and aggressive system changes to meet the evolving and unmet needs of Colorado's current and future workforce.

The task forces, recent legislative investments, and strong partnerships across executive officials, agencies, and advocates have led to even more ambitious plans to align programs in ways that can potentially make important systems changes. This approach to systems change makes sense, given the state's culture of local control and innovation—using influence, strategies, collaborative leadership, and policy. These early signals are promising. What matters next is how the state builds on task force recommendations, promising pilots, and existing examples of cross-sector collaboration to scale blurred or “blurry” programs in sustainable and systemic ways, especially given that many promising programs have taken advantage of one-off federal investments.

The future of Colorado is that its students will need skills for the available and often unfilled jobs right now. Parents and students should have the information they need to understand which pathways will help them secure these jobs; and the systems need to be streamlined so that they can choose which pathways to pursue and have the opportunity to access them. Employers and workforce leadership also must continue to support innovative “blurred” models that promise to create a nimble and sustainable talent pipeline that doesn’t allow for leaks. A better talent pipeline is crucial to the state’s growing economic engine—without one, they don’t have the other. Colorado now must build on the commitment to ensure every student has the option to pursue a career pathway that offers both economic opportunity and advancement. The state is also making it possible for learners to get skills training and earn a wage at the same time. These foundational elements are critical to scale and for Colorado to grow its own talent to meet its emerging economic needs based on its strong economy.

For Colorado, it is an economic imperative that the current promising programs are set up to grow and outlive the current leadership or initiative. Today, full-scale systems changes are on the table unlike ever before. The various state agencies, advocacy organizations, and business leaders that have come together in a promising way to make recommendations via legislative vehicles like HB 1330 and HB 1215 should continue to work with the current governor in his second term to seize the current moment where the needs of Colorado’s education and workforce are aligned and poised to drive dramatic, sustainable change focused on worker and learner outcomes and economic advancement.



Endnotes

¹ “Economic Forecast Shows Colorado’s Strong Economy to Continue Growing Faster than Nation,” Colorado Governor’s Office, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://www.colorado.gov/governor/news/9756-economic-forecast-shows-colorados-strong-economy-continue-growing-faster-nation#:~:text=Colorado%27s%20strong%20economy%20continues%20to,and%20powering%20our%20robust%20economy.>

² “The Big Blur,” JFF, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://www.jff.org/what-we-do/impact-stories/big-blur.>

³ In Colorado, young adults can be served in K-12 after they turn 21 as long as they were 20 as of the student count day.

⁴ “The Big Blur,” JFF, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://www.jff.org/what-we-do/impact-stories/big-blur/#resources.>

⁵ “Support In-Demand Career Workforce,” Colorado General Assembly, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb23-1246>; “Universal High School Scholarship Program,” Colorado General Assembly, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb23-205>.

⁶ “Student Resources | Care Forward Colorado,” Colorado Community College System, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://cccs.edu/new-students/explore-programs/care-forward-colorado.>

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